

Book Review

**GENETHICS: TECHNOLOGICAL
INTERVENTION IN
HUMAN REPRODUCTION
AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM**

By Bayertz K.

Originally published in German as *GenEthik*
by Rowohlt Taschenbuch, Verlag GmbH,
Hamburg, 1987.

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University of Cambridge, 1994, 342 pp.

Molecular genetics has given us new insights into the nature of life and has the potential to catalyze great medical advances. Not surprisingly, it has caught the interest of ethicists, who have even coined a new word, *genethics*, to portray this branch of medical ethics, and have taken a leading role in debating its benefits and possible hazards.

GenEthics is a 1994 translation of a book originally published in German in 1987. What are its contributions to today's debates? It is a deeply philosophical discussion centering on such questions as whether there are any reasons to reject genetic and reproductive technology on principle, and, if so, whether a decision to reject it can be justified by its effect in altering human nature.

The author unfortunately reveals his unfamiliarity with genetics when he states that *all* the offspring of people with Huntington disease inherit the disease. This error illustrates the failure of geneticists to make the fundamentals of their science widely understood, so as to allow informed public discussion. Many geneticists have a parallel problem in trying to follow philosophical arguments, which too often seem remote from their own concerns about the appropriateness and safety of applications of current molecular genetic technology.

The author discusses at length the philosophical aspects of reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization, cloning, and gene therapy. Since the original publication of this book, guidelines for dealing with these technologies have been drawn up in many countries, including the United States and Canada, with

wide public participation. The current ethical concerns of geneticists center on rather different topics: for example, privacy and confidentiality of genetic information, carrier testing when the currently available tests will fail to identify some carriers, and the risk of discrimination if private genetic information falls into the hands of potential employers or insurance companies. As for gene therapy, at present geneticists are frustrated by its difficulties, and the question of whether somatic cell gene therapy is acceptable, but germline gene therapy not, seems at the moment rather unreal.

One of the chief reasons for concern about new reproductive technologies is the "slippery slope" argument. If hormonal treatment will allow an abnormally short child to grow taller, will there be public pressure for the same treatment for shorter-than-average children within the normal range to add a few inches and gain the social benefit of greater height? (In American presidential elections, the taller candidate usually wins.) Will we move on to "designer babies"? Will success in somatic gene therapy, when it comes, lead us to try germline therapy for some devastating disorder? And where might that eventually lead? All of us, not just the professional philosophers and professional geneticists, have a stake in the answers.

The history of humanity is the history of change, in what is known and in what values are held. Values and ethical views are not changeless. The intellectual insights of molecular genetics are already affecting our understanding of our place within nature. Meanwhile, our first attempts to apply molecular genetic knowledge are sometimes having unexpected results; for example, in families affected by Huntington disease, carriers of the Huntington gene can now be identified, but many ethical problems surround this identification. Geneticists need a continuing debate on changing values. This book may help us understand some of the issues raised by philosophers, even if we do not always agree with their views.

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